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SUBJECT: EXPERT TELLS ASD VERSHBOW GOR HAS CHANGED ATTITUDE

Classified By: Ambassador John R. Beyrle. Reasons 1.4 (a), (b), (d), (f), and (h).

¶1. (C) Summary: PIR Center Director Vladimir Orlov told ASD Vershbow on July 8 that the attempts to reset U.S.-Russia relations, culminating in the July 6-8 summit, had improved the GOR's attitude toward the United States. He expressed optimism that genuine U.S.-Russia cooperation would be possible on many issues, including arms control, missile defense, and Iran. The GOR might even support tougher UN sanctions against Iran if Russia and the U.S. enjoyed good relations. He added that only a minority of Russians believed an improvement in U.S.-Iran relations would be detrimental to Russian interests. End Summary.

We Have Reset, Now Must Upgrade

¶2. (C) Center for Political Research (PIR Center) Director Vladimir Orlov told Assistant Secretary of Defense Alexander Vershbow in a July 8 meeting that President Obama's "reset button" and subsequent engagement with Russia, including the July 6-8 summit, succeeded in changing the mood of the GOR. Although the MOD was lagging behind somewhat, he noted it was now easier for Russian think tanks to talk to GOR officials and exchange ideas. He said that President Obama's holistic approach toward Russia, as opposed to the previous administration's tendency to selectively engage with Russia, was greatly appreciated by the GOR. Now that President Obama has successfully "reset" U.S.-Russia relations, it was time to "upgrade" them. Orlov cautioned, however, that just as newly released computer software initially has glitches that need to be fixed, so would U.S.-Russia relations.

¶3. (C) Orlov said that one year ago he was skeptical the U.S. and Russia would be able to find common ground and cooperate on much of anything. He added that he thought it would take a long time to overcome the damage to the U.S.-Russia relationship that was done during the previous administration. While admitting that there would be future challenges in the U.S.-Russia relationship, such as possibly Ukraine or Georgia, the GOR had been "instructed to be constructive," as both Medvedev and President Obama sought success stories. He said such constructive engagement could lay the groundwork for a successful Nonproliferation Treaty review conference in 2010. "This is not just a technical meeting," he said, adding that failure at that conference would harm the future of arms control.

START Follow-On Agreement a Modest Step

14. (C) Orlov called the START Follow-On document signed by POTUS and Medvedev a "modest, but necessary step." Completing negotiations before December 5 would be difficult, as many outstanding issues were contentious. The financial crisis had helped efforts to reach an agreement, however, because it had shown the GOR just how interconnected the U.S. and Russia were.

Missile Defense Cooperation Possible

15. (C) Orlov praised President Obama's "realistic" approach toward missile (MD) cooperation. He said that, while cooperating on the use of the Gabala radar site was still possible, many Russian conservatives were concerned the U.S. would still deploy elements of an MD system in Poland and the Czech Republic, causing much debate in the GOR on MD cooperation with the United States.

Russia-Iran Relations

16. (C) Orlov argued that Russia took nuclear proliferation threats seriously. The GOR considered Pakistan to be the biggest proliferation threat, followed by the DPRK, with Iran a tertiary concern, according to Orlov. He said many Russian analysts believed Iran would move forward with its research and get close to obtaining a nuclear weapon, but would not cross that threshold unless it thought it was necessary for

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its security.

17. (C) The GOR was willing to cooperate with the U.S. on Iran, Orlov said, and pointed to Russia's refusal to activate the Bushehr nuclear reactor on June 30 as an example of this. He added that Russia was impressed by the language used in President Obama's inauguration speech, in which President Obama said the U.S. would extend its hand if (Iran) unclenched its fist. Orlov expressed his hope that President Obama's offer was still on the table.

18. (C) Orlov posited that tougher UN sanctions against Iran would not correct Tehran's behavior, but the GOR might support such a move if relations between the U.S. and Russia were good. Many Russians, he said, had business interests in the region, and did not want to see a war erupt in Iran. Orlov admitted, however, that Iran was not one of Russia's major trading partners. Military sales to Iran, he said, were largely political, rather than commercial in nature, and therefore could be cut if politics required it.

U.S.-Iran-Russia Relations

19. (C) Orlov called the notion that a U.S.-Iran rapprochement would harm Russian interests in the region a "minority view." Presidential Foreign Policy Advisor Prikhodko, for example, advocated helping the U.S. with Iran and was "fed up" with Iran's "schemes." Most Russians wanted a peaceful, stable Middle East, and did not approve of Iran causing unrest in the region. There was a window of opportunity to cooperate on Iran now, he said.

110. (U) ASD Vershbow cleared this cable.
BEYRLE